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By John Muir.

PROFESSOR JOHN MUIR.

All the world is sprinkled with gold, but precious sparsely in most places. Nature, it seems, put just enough of the exciting stuff into the starry mass to keep people on the move. Most of that portion of it lying within reach of the miner in the two Americas is on the Pacific side, in the main mountain ranges. All the mountains from the Straits of Magellan to Alaska are gold-bearing, and many mines in them have been worked for centuries and are still being worked. But the best of the discovered placers to the southward—the poor man's mines—are apparently exhausted, therefore attention has been turned to the north. Most of the Yukon basin is covered with auriferous gravel, glacial drift, as it is called. But only where the gold it holds has been concentrated by the washing of streams still in existence or by those that have vanished with the glaciers is it rich enough to pay for working, whether on the plains at the base of the fountain mountains or in the hollows and valleys in their midst.

El Dorados and bonanzas are becoming rather common nowadays, for in the general mining revival in progress new ones, big or little, are being discovered every year. But they never lose their charm or lack a crowd. From King Solomon's time to our own every fresh discovery has been followed by a wave of excitement, and the counting of the yellow ounces has been eagerly listened to by the industrious and lazy alike. Strange to say, the more remote and inaccessible the new mines, the richer they are thought to be and the more anxiously are they sought for.

Big, pathless, frozen Alaska is an ideal country for El Dorados. Unexplored countries are growing scarce, and therefore the world has been listening with eager expectancy for gold news from the wild Arctic and sub-Arctic regions. For the last sixteen years or more hundreds of adventurous prospectors have been bravely spying Alaska, making holes here and there along the more accessible streams; and when at length news of rich Klondyke came over the mountains many were ready to run to it. But would-be miners in this big Northland may better take their time in running, for as far as this exciting Klondyke spot is concerned, it is all taken up, every auriferous inch of it. The news of its richness reached the Yukon miners long before it got across the mountains to newspaper readers, and they promptly forsook their claims on the other streams and rushed headlong day and night, with or without sufficient provisions, over hill and dale, brush and bog, to the new diggings. Therefore, except as showing what may possibly be found in other portions of the vast unprospected wilderness, the Klondyke should be regarded as ancient history, and no more to be depended on than the old washed out placers of California.

In courting fortune in Alaska one should go slow, count the cost, go into training and study mining like any other business. That there is no reason for killing, pell-mell haste is at once seen in the light of the experience of the three or four hundred of the bravest and most skillful prospectors that ever dared a wilderness. It took them more than fifteen years to discover this one very rich spot. Henceforth, of course, prospecting will be immensely encouraged and accelerated, but the vast extent of the territory and the difficulties to be encountered as to transportation of supplies, frozen, brushy, moss-covered ground, shortness of the prospecting season, etc., will keep the country wild—a poor man's country—for many years to come. Under rare conditions fortunes have been made in new countries in almost every other business as well as mining; but these are the wide, wide exceptions, not the rule. Mining is mostly slow, dull, hard work. Strong, sober, wide-awake men, thousands of them, have been courting gold in the best wildernesses for over twenty years without making more than a grim, bare living. Nobody has a right to expect to get rich in Alaska or any other gold field on the globe without giving the best part of his life to the business. As far as these new Alaska mines are concerned it is stating the case moderately to say that no one unable or unwilling to stay and work faithfully and patiently in the frosty wilderness for at least ten years should venture there at all.

Less than one in a hundred now crowding into the territory hoping to make a fortune from the frozen placers in a year or two will be successful. From the exciting glare of exceptionally yellow gravel and yellow quartz veins every right-minded man will turn his eyes away, or look at them only when brought forward together with the thousands of barren or lean beds that have yielded nothing but disappointment. I am not trying to discourage adventure in Alaska or anywhere else. By one lure or another Nature takes pains to scatter people as well as to gather them together, and I know very well that the miner is in many places the pioneer of civilization where gold is the first crop. Nevertheless one should guard against the wrong love of the marvelous and mysterious which leads to the notion that whatever is far off and hard to reach must necessarily be better than what is near.

The same unreasonable notion that urges people into the most inaccessible regions as the best for fortune-making, leads to the belief that for the richest rocks one must look far beneath the surface into difficult, costly darkness.

But throughout the entire gold basin of the Yukon and the coast region of Alaska, what is now the surface of the ground was, a very short geological time ago, from half a mile to a mile beneath the surface. The mechanical down-grinding of the Alaska ice-sheet during the glacier period de-graded the mountains and plains to this extent at least. Therefore the present exposed edges of quartz veins is that portion of them which before the glacial period could be reached only by sinking a shaft thousands of feet deep. Let the prospector therefore bear in mind that, apart from the superficial weathering of a few feet or inches on the exposed edges, every mineral vein has already been prospected by Nature to a great depth, and that sinking a little farther on it is not likely to develop anything differing much from what is now on the surface.

The huge, all-embracing ice-mantle of the glacial period that a short geological time ago covered all the Yukon basin and flowed over it like a broad ocean current, ground down all the rocks alike, making no special account of their mineral wealth, most of which, with the rest of the morainal detritus, was pushed out into the sea beyond the reach of the miner. Therefore it is only that part of the waste of the continent deposited when the ice-mantle was shrinking and receding from the sea which forms the present drift and placer beds. It appears, therefore, that placers are simply moraine material, washed and re-formed and deposited as enriched gravel beds, by the abundant waters which poured from the front of the gradually receding ice-sheet, and the separate glaciers into which the ice-sheet was broken up. Glacial drift, of course, contains gold and everything else that the crushed rocks were made of. But we repeat that it is only after the general mass of detritus has been washed and re-formed by streams that carry away much of the lighter material that the gold in it by this natural sluicing is concentrated in what are called "rich placers." This placer formation is going on now along all the streams. But much of this work was done by streams that vanished with the glaciers in which their sources lay. And because the ice-sheet covered all the ground those ancient placers occur on hillsides and hilltops, and broad plateaus far above the reach of the present streams, and much gold may be found in them as well as in those lining the banks and channels of existing rivers and their tributaries. I throw out these hints hoping they will do no harm; that they will cool, rather than inflame, the present excitement. I never wasted a minute hunting gold mines, knowing that gold dust in one's eyes prevents one from seeing much else. As a geologist, however, I have studied gold gravel, like any other gravel.

Grinding, mining, placer-forming glaciers and their streams may be seen in action today all along the mountains of Southeastern Alaska. When I was exploring the range I found a party of miners washing gold gravel at the foot of a glacier in Holkam bay, where the method of formation of the young, growing placers was so simple and clearly displayed that it was at once recognized by the Indians that sailed my canoe. Contemplating the glacier at work on the mountain, and the miners at work in the washed moraine at the foot of it, they said; "That glacier is digging out the gold for them fellows."

The main gold belt in its northern extension from unrivaled California through the Coast and Rocky mountain States and British Columbia has yielded and is yielding plenty of good metal. One of the most interesting of the northern mining districts, as illustrating the promising richness of the belt in its northern extension, is the Cassiar, discovered in 1873 on Dease, Thibert, Defot and McDames creeks, tributaries of the Mackenzie, near the Yukon divide. The placers on these streams were considered rich even by Californians, yielding at first from $20 to $200 a day to the hand. Altogether they are said to have yielded about five millions. The whole region, like the Yukon basin, is overlaid with glacial drift, and so deeply that there are but few spots even in the channels of the swiftest streams where the bedrock is exposed. When I visited this region in 1879 most of the miners were leaving it, not because the placers were exhausted, but because, with provisions at a dollar a pound, they no longer paid. The same year I found thirty or forty miners at work on a placer in Shucks inlet, about seventy-five miles up the coast from Fort Wrangel. These mines are still being profitably worked; for the coast region of Southeastern Alaska has a mild climate, allowing gold washing and prospecting even in winter, while water and fuel are abundant, and provisions cheap. Twelve miners were then working a little farther up the coast, and a small quartz mill was crushing ore on Baranoff island, near Sitka. Since that time many important discoveries have been made along the coast until now perhaps $2,000,000 a year are quietly produced this side of the Yukon. Among the islands of the Alexander archipelago, as well as on the mainland, the prospector is ever busy with pick and pan, paddling from place to place in his dug-out canoe, and occasionally "striking it rich."

After my first visit to the Taku glaciers, I camped one night on Douglas island, and, noticing the quartz there and on the mainland across the channel, I said to my Indian crew, who could hardly believe that ice and not gold was the object of my explorations: "If I were hunting gold I would stop here." Next summer the Silver Bow and Douglas island mines were discovered near our campground, which yield over $1,000,000 a year, while the quartz supply, it is said, will last a century. That same year I heard of a party of prospectors who had gone into the Yukon basin with Indian packers from Cassiar, and on the coast I met a party who said they had gone over the Chilkat pass in the season of 1878, The Chilkat chief, they said, treated them well and furnished them with packers. What they found or how far they went, I don't know. Up to this time the Chilkats had been hostile to miners seeking to enter the Yukon country by the passes they held, fearing their trade with the tribes in the interior would be disturbed. But when they saw how greatly the Stickeens had profited by the travel to the mines up their river, they changed their minds and encouraged prospectors to go their way.

After the discovery of coarse gold on Forty Mile River, in 1886, miners pushed to the Yukon in ever-increasing numbers, but up to the Klondyke discovery last year perhaps less than $2,000,000 worth of dust had been laboriously picked and scratched, washed and riddled from the whole immense Yukon territory. It appears therefore that, apart from geological indications, gold enough has been discovered on the north end of the mountain belt of the continent to show that it promises well, though not enough so far to prove that it is either richer or poorer than adjacent southern portions. We are inclined to guess, however, that more gold will be found in Alaska than has been found in California, not because of the superior richness of the deposits, but because they are far more extensive. What the outcome of the whole territory is to be nobody knows. This is still the day of small things in the north. Probably not one in a hundred of the auriferous veins and placers even of the comparatively accessible coast region have been touched by the miner's pick, while, excepting a few narrow strips, the great interior basin is still a wilderness, its mineral wealth of every kind about as darkly hidden as when it was covered by the ice of the glacial period. And so it will long remain a poor man's country. The Klondyke will build roads and supplies will be cheapened, but wholesome drawbacks will keep it wild for many years. Boys will play their games, go to school, study mining at their leisure and still be in time to share the wealth of the North.